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## ABSTRACT

Communicative competence in a given language is not guaranteed by competency in the understanding and use of linguistic structures. As part of the testing corpus of an individual's communicative competence in a second language, an oral proficiency interview may provide some insight into the individual's communicative ability in a variety of sociolinguistic situations. Caution is advised in the use of this method in terms of its predictive strength and the mechanics of its application. For an oral proficiency interview to function as a valid testing instrument, the entire range of problem areas that will be met in its application must be identified and addressed before the interview begins. In addition, the validity of the interview as an accurate judge of non-interview type oral language situations must also be ascertained before it is put into use. The best guides for the development of oral proficiency interviews are the speech acts characterizing the language use to be expected of individuals both in their work environment and with their peers. (Author/JK)

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Michel Lange

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE USE OF INTERVIEWS  
FOR ASSESSING SECOND-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY\*

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1. Introduction

The Foreign Service Institute oral proficiency interview (hereafter FSI) is a well-known method for the assessment of proficiency<sup>1</sup> in a non-native language. Enlightening discussions of the FSI interview or variants thereof<sup>2</sup> can be found in the three papers by Jones, Clark, and Wilds (and in the discussions on these papers) in Jones and Spolsky (1975: 1-44). Clark (1972: 118-132) also presents a general appraisal of this type of language proficiency test. Jones (1976) defends the use of a "subjective" test of this kind, reminding us that not even objective-type tests can be fully "objective" insofar as these too are ultimately the product of the tester's view of what constitutes appropriate content and structure. The same author outlines five conditions which, if met, can render proficiency interviews a valid and reliable instrument (p. 247):

- (i) the specification of the significant language criteria to be evaluated;
- (ii) the training of raters with regard to these criteria;
- (iii) the construction of the interview test in a way that it is linguistically realistic and a rational sample of the language being tested;
- (iv) proper administration of the test;
- (v) accurate evaluation and quantification of the performance.

Jones's paper deals with these conditions in broad terms. We shall concern ourselves with points (i) and (iii) in particular but also with a few aspects surrounding proficiency interviews in general. If frequent reference is made throughout this paper to the FSI-type interview, this is done not so much in order to single out this type for special praise or criticism as to refer to a long-established and well-documented proficiency interview method for purposes of exemplification.

\* While any shortcomings in this article are of the author's own doing, he wishes to thank Darien Neufeld for helpful comments and suggestions.

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## 2. On Some Characteristics of Proficiency Interviews

The oral proficiency interview represents one of the most flexible and situationally realistic methods of assessing second or foreign-language speaking performance in prolonged face-to-face communication situations. However, it would be unreasonable to expect this method to overcome all possible difficulties.<sup>3</sup> While the interview situation much more closely resembles a real communicative use of a language than say, speaking to a tape recorder or reciting paradigms, it nevertheless retains some elements of artificiality. Thus, if proficiency interviews are used in order to assess the ability to communicate in the context of one's job or profession, the roles of the participants in the interview situation may differ considerably from the roles involved in the communication situations which characterize the same persons' occupations.<sup>4</sup> Stylistically too, some bias will generally occur in favour of the "consultative" and "formal" styles of the language in which testing occurs, however these be defined for a given language.<sup>5</sup>

Another possible consequence of the very purpose of the interview is that some interviewers/scorers, unless they are trained to avoid such a tendency, may sometimes be induced to focus their attention on the examinee's use of the linguistic code as such, to the extent that they might undervalue the examinee's ability to communicate. While we are of course justified in assuming that the examinee's usual interlocutors in job contexts would in normal circumstances monitor his or her speech (without necessarily being aware of doing so), as recent analyses of conversational interaction and "repair" indicate, it does not necessarily follow that these interlocutors would evaluate a non-native performance with the same set of criteria as are used by examiners.<sup>6</sup> Outside the testing situation, the examinee's interlocutors would undoubtedly notice some performance deficiencies but would also have recourse to compensatory strategies for extracting the gist of messages in spite of linguistic errors.

However, if the interview situation can introduce factors into the evaluation process which might, without sufficient precautions, prove disadvantageous for the examinee, it can also offer some examinees various advantages which they may lack in other situations. Examiners are required to be patient, attentive, and unprejudiced persons not permitted to display intolerance towards a given examinee's deficiencies in a non-native language. Unfortunately, no guarantees can be given that non-native speakers in ordinary situations - - especially work-related situations - - will always have the privilege of choosing surroundings in which to encode and decode messages. On the job, for example, employees may need to understand or make themselves understood in spite of various types of channel noise, distorted or incomplete input messages, and so forth. Another aspect to consider is that of the particular linguistic code used in the interview test. The interview is likely to take place in the prestige dialect of a given language (or close variants thereof), the dialect with which the majority of examinees in that language are likely to be familiar.<sup>7</sup> However, here too, no assurance can be given that examinees will never have to cope with unfamiliar dialects outside of the testing situation. Thus, it can be seen that a properly conducted proficiency interview is not unfair to an examinee in that the approach can be more lenient than "real-life" communication might be on some occasions.

### 3. On Interview Content

As regards condition (iii) above, appropriate training of interviewers will help them avoid vocabulary areas and aspects of the grammatical system which may be too rare or specialized to represent a reasonable sample of the structures and lexical content which the examinee might normally have to deal with. With properly phrased questions and other elicitation techniques it is also possible to give examinees the opportunity to show their capacity to respond in linguistically and communicationally appropriate ways or to show to what extent they can at least exploit their resources in order to compensate for their deficiencies. In these ways, as well as others, an interview test can then be rendered "linguistically realistic" as well as a "rational sample" of the language being tested, at least to the extent allowed by the constraints of the interview situation.

According to Clark (1972: 128) the purpose of the FSI interview is to determine "the student's [or any examinee's -- JR] ability to communicate appropriately in a number of language-use situations" or, put another way, "the ease and effectiveness with which the student would be considered able to communicate in various language-use situations" (p. 126). To assess such communicative ability, the FSI approach employs a set of "Absolute Language Proficiency Descriptions", i.e. rating levels, which are viewed as statements combining "desired linguistic abilities" with "operational statements of communicative competence" (p. 126). Taking as an example Absolute Rating Level 2 (Limited Working Proficiency), we find, as regards "linguistic abilities", the following: "... has a speaking vocabulary sufficient to express himself simply with some circumlocutions; accent, though often quite faulty, is intelligible; can usually handle elementary constructions quite accurately but does not have thorough or confident control of the grammar". The "operational statements of communicative competence" in this case consist of the following: "Can handle with confidence but not with facility most social situations including introductions and casual conversations about current events, as well as work, family, and autobiographical information; can handle limited work requirements, needing help in handling any complications or difficulties; can get the gist of most conversations on non-technical subjects (i.e.: topics which require no specialized knowledge)".

Of course, some of the "social situations" can probably be partially tested insofar as it is possible to introduce particular topics into the proficiency interview and other kinds of opportunities also arise at the interview itself (e.g.: greetings, introductions). However, it should also be clear that the "ability to handle work requirements" may well be difficult to assess in any direct fashion. Raters are thus obliged to extrapolate from the observed interview performance to hypothetical communication situations that might arise in the context of the examinee's job.

A careful look at the materials used for the training of interviewers would probably convince the majority of us that the FSI-type interview, as well as some other conceivable types of interview, can provide examiners

with only general insights into an examinee's ability to perform at levels 3 and 4, which are defined respectively as:

- (3) Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics.
- (4) Able to use the language fluently and accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs.

Given the complexity of the notional and propositional content likely to occur in communication at these levels, it follows that the linguistic proficiency (e.g.: fluency and accuracy) and overall language resources (e.g.: vocabulary) needed for communicative competence at such levels will be generally high. In this context it should be recalled that the FSI Oral Interview was originally devised in order to test the proficiency of U.S. Foreign Service Officers in whatever foreign language they were required to use. It seems reasonable to expect that in such an occupational context the level of abstractness or complexity of ideas which an examinee would be required to cope with would be rather high. Precisely such a degree of notional complexity would represent "professional topics" or "professional needs". However, it does not necessarily follow that the same degree of subject matter complexity represents a professional need for everyone. There is obviously an important problem of content selection which cannot be discussed in detail in the present paper. The foregoing remarks are intended merely to show that great care should be taken to train examiners to offer interviewees verbal stimuli that will permit them to perform at a high level of proficiency (if they are able to do so) and to discuss topics that really represent or come close to being a "rational sample" of "professional topics", whether these topics are highly abstract in content or rather mundane. However, if "professional" is understood as a synonym of "occupational", we should not also assume that the performance level required in order to meet such professional needs is necessarily that which is identified by the FSI proficiency descriptions (i.e.: it is so for U.S. Foreign Service Officers, but not necessarily for all professions).

#### 4. Language Proficiency Criteria and Levels

The specification of the relevant language criteria to be evaluated is another condition mentioned by Jones (no. i above). One possible solution is to provide descriptions of proficiency levels representing general performance targets with which the examinee's performance is compared. The FSI Absolute Language Proficiency Ratings mentioned above constitute an example of this approach. These descriptions provide statements about the linguistic capabilities required with respect to the communication situations the examinee can be expected to cope with. To add a further illustration, an examinee rated at Level 1 (Elementary Proficiency) would be expected to show frequent "errors in pronunciation and grammar" and experience other linguistic difficulties. In addition, with such a degree of proficiency the examinee ought to be able to "order a simple meal, ask for shelter or lodging, ask and give simple directions, make purchases and tell time".

Such rating levels have been in use since 1956, cf. Wilds (1975), and it is probable that both empirical observation and extended use of such descriptions have confirmed that a certain degree of correspondence exists between the different types of communicative capacities in situations existing outside of the testing context and the degrees of proficiency with which they are associated. It also appears reasonable to suppose that, in a general way, the better the degree of proficiency the more easily, efficiently, and accurately a given individual should be able to handle an ever-increasing variety of communication situations. Nonetheless, Clark (1972: 126) justifiably points out that "such correspondences should not, however, be assumed a priori but should be determined empirically through controlled studies".<sup>8</sup>

To assist scorers in rating particular candidates, the FSI has developed an additional two-way grid of "Factors in Speaking Proficiency" which incorporates the five Absolute Rating levels on the horizontal dimension and the five linguistic performance<sup>9</sup> categories of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension on the vertical dimension.<sup>10</sup> Thus each cell specifies a performance level for a given category in relation to one of the Absolute Reading Levels. At the time of assessment, raters mark the cells which most accurately reflect the examinee's performance.

Clark (1972: 128) suggests that scoring aids like the above-mentioned could constitute a drawback since they may lead raters "away from paying close attention to the original performance criteria on which the test is conceptually based". While conceding that "accuracy of pronunciation, fluency, extent of vocabulary and so forth would be expected to have a bearing on the final rating in that these aspects would contribute to the overall accuracy and ease of communication" (p. 129), he feels that the categorization of such aspects may obscure in the rater's mind the original broad criteria on which the Absolute Rating Levels rest.

The question raised by Clark relates in part to the problem of the proper training of interviewers/raters. As Jones (1976) points out, it is imperative that scoring criteria be specified and assigned a relative value for the total population. While untrained native speakers could at times agree rather closely in their classification of certain examinees (e.g.: the best and the poorest) on the basis of little more than brief, overall impressions of how well someone communicates, ultimately such an approach would likely prove too unreliable for official use by any institution. Especially in order to ensure the reliability of the assessment in those instances where examinees might suffer careerwise from inconsistent evaluation, raters must be trained to assess performance on the basis of the same criteria or by reference to the same native models. Ultimately, few of us would claim that grammatical accuracy or fluency (e.g.: pauses, hesitations, rhythm, rate of delivery, false starts, etc.) play no part in one's ability to communicate or have no influence on speakers' judgements about such an ability. However -- if we may read between the lines -- Clark's remarks seem to constitute a warning against the possible tendency on the part of some raters to assess linguistic factors for their own sake, without giving proper consideration to how such performance reflects the examinee's ability to communicate at the levels aimed at by the Absolute Proficiency Ratings. Separate bits of information thus obtained should nonetheless be

employed so as to arrive at a general indication of an examinee's communicative capacity in the non-native language. Ultimately, one reason for analyzing various performance aspects would appear to be not merely to determine how accurately one can perform (linguistic accuracy being only one facet of performance) but also to determine to what extent examinees succeed in compensating for any gaps in their linguistic resources.

Such an approach to the use of the linguistic "Factors in Speaking Proficiency" seems all the more appropriate in view of Oller's observations (1979) to the effect that factor analysis indicates the FSI Oral Interview technique has some difficulty in distinguishing the various components of oral language performance (pp. 325 and 431). In fact Oller suggests (p. 321) that the separate component ratings, i.e. for the "Factors", probably add little to what can be obtained by assigning one of the overall rating levels (i.e.: one of the "Absolute Rating Levels").<sup>11</sup>

Such considerations tend to lend support to the use of the Absolute Rating Levels as the primary descriptors on which to base the evaluation of proficiency, leaving the more specific linguistic criteria as a form of back-up criteria in assisting raters in the assessment of borderline examinees. A perusal of various materials used for the training of examiners in the FSI procedure (e.g.: the Manual for Peace Corps Language Testers, or the Manual for Interviewers of French, used by the New Brunswick Department of Education) shows that the more specific linguistic criteria are indeed viewed as only supplementary to the main overall descriptions. While such specific criteria may not significantly increase the efficiency of the interview test, it nevertheless appears appropriate that they should be available to examiners. After all, it appears doubtful that raters could invariably assess a performance taken to represent an individual's general proficiency without ever paying attention to the more strictly linguistic facts. We are quite willing to accept the view that linguistic ability *per se* does not always guarantee the ability to communicate effectively. But it also seems reasonable to assume that, in a general way, limitations in one's active repertoire of constructions and sentence types (to mention some linguistic criteria) could in some circumstances limit one's communicative competence. Likewise, frequent hesitations, groping for words, utterances frequently left incomplete, deviant intonation patterns, grammar errors and so forth, must place limitations on one's communicative competence, limitations for which an interlocutor must compensate in some way or other. The fact that the native interlocutor's decoding mechanism can cope with anomalies should not obscure the difference between various degrees of proficiency with respect to linguistic performance factors, which, during an interview test, represent one of the more readily usable forms of evidence. In this sense, the inclusion of such linguistic evaluation criteria not only can assist raters in refining their final assessment of an examinee's proficiency but also renders the rating procedures more realistic. As was pointed out in an earlier section, only some communicative capacities are encompassed by the interview situation, in particular those which are brought into play in situations where the furnishing of information is the main communication objective.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in the context of an oral proficiency interview, evidence about the examinee's communicative competence is limited to what this person's linguistic production shows. Raters are still required to make assumptions about the examinee's total

communicative competence, and to this end the evidence provided by specific linguistic phenomena can be very useful as long as no more importance is ascribed to them than is warranted by the overall approach.<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In recent years it has been recognized that proficiency in the recognition and manipulation of linguistic structures per se does not necessarily guarantee proficiency in communicating in a given language. In view of this, the oral proficiency interview represents one of the more situationally appropriate methods of gaining insight into a non-native speaker's communicative proficiency, not only with respect to the examinee's performance at the interview but also in terms of some predictions about the subject's probable communicative capacity outside of the interview situation. While on occasion we have expressed some reservations about certain aspects of oral proficiency interviews, we have done so merely to caution potential users not to disregard certain limitations, as regards assumptions about the predictive strength of the method and the "mechanics" of its application.

As we have shown in the foregoing section, the construction of an oral proficiency interview method, or the adaptation of an existing method such as that of the FSI, requires the prior identification of a variety of problem areas for which particular solutions are needed, if proficiency interviews are to function as a valid testing instrument. Moreover, it also appears advisable that before strong claims are made on behalf of such a system, appropriate validation studies be undertaken to demonstrate that there is indeed a close relationship between the ability to perform in the interview and a similar ability to perform in communication situations typical of the environment of a particular class of examinees.

In this regard, it may be the case that the FSI-type interview (or perhaps any other type of proficiency interview) cannot really accomplish more than the evaluation of a general ability to communicate.<sup>14</sup> Especially in the light of recent efforts in the foreign language field to teach and test language for special purposes or occupational needs, it is legitimate to ask whether a proficiency interview can truly assess the ability to use "the language fluently and accurately on all levels normally pertinent to professional needs" unless such needs have been investigated sufficiently to enable testers to recognize an appropriate performance with a minimum of conjectures. Ultimately, with respect to the professional needs of persons active in a given occupational area, a knowledge of the types of speech acts characterizing the language use expected of an examinee in the work environment, as well as the kind of proficiency which his or her peers and superiors believe necessary, constitute the best guides for the selection of interview content and the specification of proficiency levels.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Cf. Clark (1972: 5) on the general definition of proficiency testing: "Testing procedures which are aimed at certifying the acquisition of real-life competencies may be referred to as **proficiency** tests in that they do not attempt to provide information about the student's achievement in a given course of instruction but rather to measure his ability to use the language for real-life purposes without regard to the manner in which that competence was acquired ... The student's [or any examinee's -- JR] performance on the test is analyzed not in terms of 'how much he has learned' but in terms of how closely his performance meets the goal standards specified".
2. Two such variants are, for example, the oral proficiency interview method set up by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, N.J., on behalf of the Peace Corps, and that in use at the Language Learning Center (LLC) of the CIA. In addition to the full "four-phase" version of the FSI-type interview, there are also abridged versions, such as the "two-phase" version; cf. Lowe (1976). A version for testing students in French is also in use as part of the New Brunswick Second Language Program.
3. See Clark's review of various types of testing and scoring approaches in Jones and Spolsky (1975: 19-24).
4. We should ask, for instance, whether oral proficiency interviews of the FSI-type or of other types which require face-to-face communication in a rather formal situation represent an equally appropriate testing approach for persons whose occupations are not of the clerical/administrative/public relations/managerial varieties. For further discussion of the situational realism of oral proficiency interviews, see Clark (1972: 124-125), as well as our own discussion later on.
5. See Joos (1967) and (1968) for the terms "consultative" and "formal"; see also Trudgill (1974: 45-54) for a discussion of "formal" and "casual" styles in connection with research on social dialects.
6. Concern with the linguistic code itself would seem to constitute a special instance of the "metalinguistic" function or use of language discussed in Jakobson (1960). The "ordinary" or "naive" native speaker's fulfillment of this function usually manifests itself through speech acts intended to clarify some aspect of the use of the code ("Do you actually mean ...?" or "Come again?" etc.). Of course, speakers on occasion concern themselves in more explicit fashion with matters relative to the code, for example, when they make statements about "good" or "bad" usage, with or without good evidence in support of their arguments. For a brief discussion of various conceptions of the basic language functions, see Bell (1976: 82-87). On the ordinary speaker/listener's evaluation of the speech of others, see also Oller (1979: 326).

7. The majority of persons undergoing oral proficiency interviews are probably examinees who have acquired a certain degree of proficiency in the language classroom rather than in other situations. In such a learning context they would generally be exposed to those varieties deemed "correct", "educated", or "standard" but which are not necessarily the most probable in terms of the varieties which a language student will most frequently encounter outside of the classroom.
8. The complete set of descriptions has appeared in a variety of sources, e.g.: Clark (1972), Lowe (1976), Wilds (1975).
9. The term "performance" is used here in the sense of **actual language behaviour** - - analyzable and measurable at least to some extent - - which presupposes some type of **competence**, i.e.: implicit (or at times even conscious) knowledge about sounds, meanings, and structures of a given language, and of some of the social situations in which given utterances constitute appropriate linguistic messages. Thus, a record of performance contains a variety of features, some analyzable by reference to linguistic categories (e.g.: grammatical categories and relations) and some more properly analyzable by reference to the characteristics of the human apparatus for the production and reception of utterances or in terms of the social context in which utterances are actualized (e.g.: pausal phenomena, false starts, style, status of the participants in the communication event). However, whatever is here discussed under the rubric of **performance** makes no specific assumptions about particular mental processes used for the production and reception of speech.
10. These "Factors in Speaking Proficiency" have appeared in various sources, a recent one being Mareschal (1977). Detailed descriptions of the checklist of these "Factors" are available to scorers and also function as an aid in scorer training.
11. Rather than repeating here Oller's arguments, we refer readers to his entire discussion of the above points, Oller (1979: 320-326; 428-431). However, it seems appropriate to mention that in conjunction with the proficiency interviews carried out as part of the methodology used in Edwards (1977), some correlations were calculated for the two judges' evaluations of the subjects' proficiency in the second language. Some of these correlations were done both for "global" performance evaluations and evaluations based on five specific linguistic performance categories. The correlations for the latter were in general no higher than those for the former. While such results cannot be considered conclusive in any sense, they do lend some modest support to Oller's view that the general effectiveness of speech acts, rather than very specific variables, is probably the main factor influencing judges' evaluations of linguistic proficiency.
12. Of the language functions mentioned by Jakobson (1960), the "context" or "referential" function is thus predominant in such instances (without necessarily excluding other functions).

13. We noted earlier that, as interviews are usually conducted, some performance capabilities are not really put to the test. Thus, in the present context we are viewing "communicative competence" as a notion encompassing not only the capacity to use linguistic resources in socially appropriate ways in response to linguistic stimuli, but also the capacity to deal to some extent with fortuitous situational factors; as, for instance, when one must decode more than one input simultaneously or one must adopt particular linguistic "strategies" in order to communicate with an interlocutor having a very limited knowledge of the language.
14. In a more recent article, Jones (1979), concedes that the FSI test "cannot provide fine discriminations of proficiency among examinees"; however, the author once again explains his reasons for believing this type of test to be valuable if its virtues and limitations are properly understood; see in particular pp. 106 - 109.

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